The New Hero of 'Nowhere': Female Heroism in Diana Wynne Jones's *Fire and Hemlock*

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Abstract

Diana Wynne Jones' *Fire and Hemlock* (1985) tells the story of Polly Whittacker's childhood, alongside her supernatural endeavours to rescue Thomas Lynn from the queen of faeries through an elaborate game of pretend-turned-real. Underneath this plot lies a mixture of folktales, most significantly the ballad of *Tam Lin* in which a young woman must similarly save her lover, while struggling to overcome social conflicts. This dissertation aims to assert that through the reframing of the subversive heroine of this ballad, Jones constructs a new image of female heroism for a contemporary readership, while maintaining the cultural authority of folklore. In order to do so, I will assess the way in which fantasy literature has traditionally interacted with subversion as well as the image of heroinism presented by the ballad of *Tam Lin*. This will be followed by a close reading of *Fire and Hemlock*, emphasising its portrayal of femininity and heroism as well as paying close attention to the way it connects both to authorship. Through these, I will show that Polly's personal development, heroism and authorship are closely tied together and develop in parallel, thus presenting her coming of age and finding her voice as the social conflict she needs to overcome.

Keywords: *Fire and Hemlock,* Diana Wynne Jones, *Tam Lin*, Fantasy Literature, Children's Literature, Balladry, Folklore, Bildungsroman, Kunstlerroman, Female Heroism.

Introduction

"Only thin, weak thinkers despise fairy stories. Each one has a true, strange fact hidden in it, you know, which you can find if you look." (Jones, 2011: 171)

Diana Wynne Jones is, arguably, one of the most underappreciated fantasy authors of all time. While she has won a multitude of awards and is much beloved by critics of fantasy literature —so much so that *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* is dedicated to her— her work remains relatively obscure. Although there are a number of fantasy critics, such as Farah Mendlesohn and Martha P. Hixon, who hold her in high regards, she is not frequently studied or publically well-known. In the foreword to *Reflections: On the Magic of Writing* Neil Gaiman attributes this obscurity in part to a certain unfashionableness compared to the books popular with "teachers and those who published and bought books for young readers, from the 1970s until the 1990s" (Gaiman, 2012: xiv) and in part to their difficult, complex nature, which resists classification as either children's or adult fiction, science fiction or fantasy, as well as much other categories that tend to make a book marketable.

However, in recent years more and more critical work has been published which concentrates on Jones' work and its influence within the field of fantasy, such as *Diana Wynne Jones: An Exciting and Exacting Wisdom* and *Diana Wynne Jones: Children's Literature and the Fantastic Tradition* (2005). These will serve as the main body of secondary sources in respect to Jones for this dissertation, alongside articles which discuss her work in comparison to others, such as C.W. Sullivan's article on the use of traditional ballads in children's literature.

Often considered Jones' best work, *Fire and Hemlock* is the story of Polly Whittacker's meeting of Thomas Lynn and her subsequent efforts to rescue him from his

ex-wife, Laurel, who is secretly the queen of fairies. Seemingly straightforward, it is in actuality "a complexly woven novel built on a series of shifting layers and surprising spirals", whose "narrative is multilayered, with these layers connected through repeated motifs drawn from music, folklore and folktale, and literature" (Hixon, 2002: 96). The most distinct of these is the use of the ballad of *Tam Lin,* the basic structure of which runs parallel to *Fire and Hemlock* as it deals with the rescuing of Tam Lin by his lover, Janet, after their affair leaves her pregnant. *Tam Lin* stands out amongst the Child Ballads for its female protagonist, offering female heroism in an environment where that is surprisingly subversive. *Fire and Hemlock* mirrors that subversion through Polly; Throughout the novel, heroism is treated as conscious, deliberate behaviour, due to Polly's active taking on of the role of a hero-in-training. This allows for an extensive look at what heroism means for this young girl in the 20th Century.

In this dissertation, I argue that *Fire and Hemlock* renegotiates the relationship between the contemporary reader and this mythic text so as to construct a new image of feminine heroism that remains rooted in the familiarity and cultural authority of folklore. By reframing a ballad about feminine heroism, Jones redefines what it means to be a hero and a woman for a contemporary audience, as well as "redefining the qualities of heroism to include female experience, and reaffirming women's access to the narrative storehouse of the past" (Attebery, 1992: 89).

To that end, this paper will be organised in three main sections. The first section aims to explore fantasy literature's interplay with myth and how this enables it to subvert the established order. Additionally, it focuses on *Tam Lin*'s emphasis on a woman's social conflicts and the way in which socially transgressive behaviour is rewarded instead of

punished. Hopefully, this will lay the groundwork for a thorough analysis of the manner in which *Fire and Hemlock* reframes those social conflicts for a contemporary reader.

The second section deals with femininity as presented throughout *Fire and Hemlock*, analysing the varying traits presented by different women in the novel as well as the manner in which Polly navigates those traits in order to perform heroically. As the women in the novel are arranged in sets of threes, embodying varying aspects of the same trait, this section will approach them as such.

Finally, the third section is devoted to the novel's heroine, Polly. By focusing on her initial rejection, but ultimate acceptance, of her own femininity, I aim to highlight her awareness of, and distaste for, the typical space occupied by women in folktales, as well as the manner in which this role was arguably forced upon her. Additionally, I argue that by reframing Tam Lin as a Bildungsroman, emphasis is placed on female development instead of female sexuality, reflecting a society in which a woman no longer fears the loss of virtue, but instead struggles to come of age and find her strength and voice. Furthermore, as *Fire and Hemlock* also delineates Polly's growth as a reader, critic and storyteller, it becomes a Künstlerroman which places a woman's artistic growth at the forefront. As such, coming of age as a hero is made equal to coming of age as both an individual and a writer.

Chapter 1. Making the Old New: Fantasy Literature, Subversion and Tam Lin.

Fantasy literature can be notoriously difficult to define; the lack of an established canon combined with the frequent use of the term to refer to a formulaic kind of storytelling has led to much debate about what traits define fantasy as a literary genre. One of the key theorists in delineating the difference between fantasy as a genre or formula is Brian Attebery. *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) presents fantasy as a group of texts that share a set of tropes, which may be formulaic components such as magical creatures, but more vitally tend towards narrative techniques. Attebery suggests several narrative components frequently at the core of modern fantasy literature, amongst which are its self-reflexiveness, playfulness and its interplay with nonmimetic traditional forms through the incorporation of folktales and myth.

Indeed, fantasy literature is full of authors who retell older tales, meshing them together and altering their meaning. As such, fantasy is highly intertextual, continuously referring back to the texts, both fantastical and not, that came before it. However, simply identifying the texts retold in modern fantasy novels is much less interesting than "(looking) at how the fantasist appropriates from, engages with, travesties and reconstitutes the myth" (Attebery, 2014: 3) they retell. It is not a coincidental tendency, nor is it born out of a lack of originality; instead, "fantasy and science fiction authors use traditional materials (...) to allow their readers to recognise, in elemental and perhaps subconscious ways, the reality and cultural depth of the impossible worlds these authors have created" (Sullivan, 2001: 279).

In Chapter 6 of *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Attebery (2012) discusses Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) in reference to modern fantasy literature. Propp implies that folk, or fairytale characters are 'spheres of action' rather than

fully-fledged people. That is to say, they do not exist as fully developed individuals with preferences, distastes and internal workings unrelated to the story, but rather as characters whose whole being is summed up by their role in the tale (83). However, by openly celebrating these structures within fully developed novels, "modern fantasies are free to draw on both traditions and to create complex characters that are nonetheless acknowledged as 'spheres of action' in service to the story" (Attebery, 2012: 83). It would not do to simply disregard every iteration that uses the same spheres of action as being mere retellings; although the core structure may remain the same "it is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really counts" (Tolkien, 2014: 39). It is the underlying plot and spheres of action that grant fantasy its cultural relevance; in order to be understood, fantasy needs to "(channel) the fantastic imagination through the psychological and social codes revealed in (...) collective mythology" (Attebery, 1992: 9). These stories have "the legitimacy of tradition behind them and have endured because they are essentially true —not factually true or literally true—but true to the human experience" (Sullivan, 2001: 147). As such, incorporating them into modern fantasy adds both the authority of tradition and the enrichment of an additional layer to the story.

Furthermore, by providing new contexts to these underlying structures, fantasy inevitably alters the original meaning of the myths it incorporates. Because of this, fantasy literature is commonly highly subversive. Many critics have noted the tendency of fantasy literature to "resist the dominant social order" (Bould & Vint, 2012: 102), perhaps most notably Rosemary Jackson who argued that fantasy is fundamentally a fantasy of desire as well as disruption and uses that which is "neither entirely 'real' [...] nor entirely 'unreal'" (1981: 19) to scrutinise what is the 'norm' that is taken for granted as reality (1981: 21).

After all, “through their depiction of incidents in which "goodness" is rewarded and "evil" deeds punished, folk and fairy tales function as pedagogical tools that illustrate cultural values, enforce the status quo, and define socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour” (Hixon, 2004: 67). Because of this pedagogical function, folk and fairy tales, as well as other mythical texts, more often than not confirm the traditional values of their surroundings. Socially transgressive behaviour is typically punished, or at the very least must be atoned for, and those who are rewarded in tales tend to reflect the behaviour valued by the dominant social order. As such, by altering these tales and reframing them for a modern audience, subversive fantasy texts can “(encourage) the reader to see meaning as something unstable and elusive, rather than single and self-evident” (Attebery, 2014: 2).

This has been especially the case in regards to women fantasists and feminine presence in literature. Both overt and more discreet political retellings of famous myths and tales are common and frequently serve to return “the repressed into the realm of representation” (Bould & Vint, 2012: 102), and as women have often been out of the realm of representation, fantasy frequently takes it upon itself to utilise myth to raise doubts concerning the dominant social order which establishes this as the norm. Frequently, this is done approaching a mythical text which previously supported the status quo; Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) is a good example, retelling the Arthurian myth from a female perspective. By raising questions about a character almost ubiquitously accepted as evil, such as Morgan le Fay, *The Mists of Avalon* generates doubt about that which has previously been accepted doubtlessly. It is not a matter of establishing a new norm, so much as “using (...) traditional materials in ways that may actually force the reader to re-examine (their) values” (Sullivan, 2001: 288).

However, the modified tale does not always need to support the dominant social order; *Fire and Hemlock* reframes the ballad of *Tam Lin* as a modern fantasy novel marketed towards children. Nonetheless, while "women in the Child ballads are nearly always depicted as victims of male social domination" who "appear only in relationship to the male characters" (Hixon, 2004: 71), with female protagonists usually occupying a fully passive role, this is not the case for *Tam Lin*. The protagonist of Child's 39th ballad, who is most frequently called Janet, is not only the protagonist of the ballad but also its heroine. Her role is entirely active; she is rescuer, not rescued. Janet is shown to be willful and headstrong, she'll "ask [Tam] nae leave" (14) to visit Carterhaugh, nor does she show any sign of shame or remorse towards those at home for her pregnancy. *Tam Lin* thus offers a heroine where very few ballads do.

Indeed, "*Tam Lin* is as much a story about a woman's social conflict as it is about supernatural events or even about true love" (Hixon, 2004: 77); Janet's sexuality, and the social conventions surrounding said sexuality, are at the core of the issues she struggles with in the ballad, starting with an overt warning against losing one's virginity to Tam Lin. However, this warning not to "come, or gae by Carterhaugh" lest you are to lose your "maidenhead" is followed directly by a description of Janet tying up her skirts "a little aboon her knee" and braiding her yellow hair (indicative of her virginity, as will be discussed in Chapter 2) "a little aboon her bree" (16), drawing attention to the fact that she is essentially preparing herself to go meet Tam Lin and as such preparing herself for sexual activity. This tension between the societal norms that condemn premarital sex and the ballad's acceptance of Janet's sexuality persists throughout; while characters such as the old knight or, in some variants, Janet's mother and sister, criticise and bemoan her behaviour the ballad itself

rewards her for it. In the end, instead of being punished for her socially unacceptable behaviour, she wins the man she loves and Tam Lin's life is saved because of it.

What is more, her rescuing Tam Lin resolves another societal conflict, namely that of her child's standing. After all, the knight's issue with her pregnancy is that he and the others will get blamed for it. However, when questioned by her father Janet reveals her love to be "an elfin grey" and refuses to give "the bairn's name" (15) to any of them; "Janet thus rejects marrying someone just for propriety's sake, even though she could have her pick of any of her father's lords" (Hixon, 2004: 75). In the end, rescuing Tam Lin also means giving her child a rightful father. As such, her violation of the established norm is rewarded without much suffering on her part; "Janet wins not only the conflict with the Queen of Fairies but also the conflict she has engaged in with society in her defiance of rules of behaviour" (Hixon, 2004: 77).

Consequently, *Tam Lin*offers a surprisingly subversive representation of female heroism. Instead of reframing a tale traditionally supportive of the status quo to question its values, *Fire and Hemlock* builds upon a pre-existing subversive tradition to renegotiate what shape that subversion takes on for a modern audience.

Chapter 2. Femininity in *Fire and Hemlock*

Arguably one of the most significant elements of *Tam Lin* as a representation of female heroism is that it is intrinsically the story of a female hero. That is to say, it is not a ballad in which gender does not matter and the hero happens to be female, but rather a story in which Janet's femininity and heroism are both central to the narrative. It is certainly what attracted Jones to the ballad as the material to be transfigured in *Fire and Hemlock.* In *The Heroic Ideal: A Personal Odyssey*, she notes that 'Janet, the hero of "Tam Lin," behaves throughout like a woman and not like a pseudo man' (2012: 89) and argues she set out to achieve the same in Polly. Rather than having a character who just so happens to be female perform heroism, she was to embody *heroinism*; the quality of being a heroine, which is, as such, inherently feminine. If 'hero' is a male or gender-neutral term, Polly was meant to personify a heroine by demonstrating the kind of heroinism that could only be performed by a woman.

As such, in order to establish how Jones portrays this heroinism, it is necessary to first evaluate how she portrays femininity. To do so, I will take a close look at the varying feminine traits represented throughout the novel, as well as the *way*in which they are represented and whether that representation applauds or condemns them.

By far the biggest change in female representation in comparison with *Tam Lin* lies in the sheer number of women present in the narrative. Due to the relatively short length of the ballad, women are far less numerous; aside from a brief appearance from sister and mother to reinforce societal values by urging Janet to terminate her pregnancy in some variants of the ballad, the presence of female characters is limited to Janet and the Faerie Queen. Moreover, this limited presence of women other than fair Janet and the dangerous queen of faeries

means *Tam Lin* inadvertently presents femininity as a good-evil binary: There are only two women present; one is bad and one is good.

Fire and Hemlock, however, contains a large number of female characters with varying ages, backgrounds, moral character and personalities. While Polly and Laurel might be considered the two opposite poles between which the other female characters range (and this, as will be argued later, is debatable), the presence of a varied spread of other women denies the possibility for a simple binary. Therefore, Jones not only fleshes out a relatively short ballad into the appropriate length for a novel, but also allows herself to construct a multifaceted image of femininity.

This feminity is perhaps best analysed by approaching the multiplicity of women present through its sets of trinities. Indeed, a close look at the novel reveals an arrangement of the female characters in threes —in line of triple deities such as Diana, the *diva triforma*— an arrangement which Jones confirms in *The Heroic Ideal,* indicating their intentional nature and placing Polly "always at the centre" (2012: 92). Each of these sets of three showcases a different aspect of a trait, as faces to a goddess, and it is the aspect of the trait that determines the outcome. Accordingly, it is through some of these triads that we can best evaluate *Fire and Hemlock*'s portrayal of femininity, what traits it engages with and what way of embodying those traits enables one to be a hero.

2.1 Silliness and Sensibility.

Firstly, there are two sets that seem to run in parallel as they deal with the topic of sensibility and wisdom; Nina, Polly and Fiona are of the same age but varying levels of sensibility whereas Polly, Ivy and Granny offer the same varying levels of sensibility at three different stages of life. Nina is silly, as is Ivy, Fiona and Granny are sensible, and Polly spends the novel continuously learning and maturing, and it is the way Polly navigates between these that allows us to take a look at what makes a hero.

"Fat, silly Nina" (14) is, from the very first moment, described as someone "wild" (17) and loud, expressing herself in "shriek[s]" (17) and demands. Polly admires her unattractive looks (Due to reasons pertaining to Polly's struggle to accept her own femininity, which will be discussed in chapter 3) and her "her bold, madcap disposition" (16). Early on in their relationship, Nina holds all the power and dominates Polly entirely, making threats that Polly always gives in to.

Nevertheless, when they are children Nina's silliness and lack of both sensitivity and sensibility —in short, her immaturity— are not shown to be a negative thing. In fact, they are what allow Polly to break free from her more restrained ways; while Polly is good at coming up with things, she "(can) not seem to break out of her prim, timid self (...) and be properly adventurous, without Nina's threats to galvanise her" (19). This shows that in actuality, even though Nina is the dominating force in the relationship, Polly is greatly dependant on that. She "(is) quite grateful to Nina" (19) when her threats and demands allow her to act bolder than she would be able to on her own. Polly welcomes the imbalance in their friendship because it means she can rely on Nina to push her to be more like the Polly she wants to be;

and, even though Polly has not yet actively decided to train herself to be a hero, to be more heroic.

It is later in life that Nina's immaturity and the traits associated with it become problematic. As they grow older, Polly learns how to be less timid and restrained and slowly works on learning and growing in her own identity, whereas Nina spends most of her time "playing one role after another as she tries to develop a sense of self-identity" (Hixon, 2002: 105). She remains as silly as a teenager as she was as a child, jumping from superstitions to stamps or the Doors, all the while not finding anything to make her own due to her superficial attitude. Nina lacks maturity, and it causes Polly to lose interest in her as she develops, growing annoyed by her fickle capriciousness and hurt by her frequent, insensitive gossiping and criticism.

When Polly first meets Fiona, it is exactly her tendency to hand out sage, down-to-earth advice —as when she tells Polly not to worry about her embarrassment during their first performance because she didn't injure herself during her fall— that makes her dislike her. However, in adolescence and adulthood, it is Fiona who provides Polly with the friendship she needs, precisely because of this sensibility. Her maturity is highlighted through her contrast with Nina, as epitomised by the episode in which Nina aims to mimic Fiona's natural red hair and ends up with a spectacular array of garish colours after forgetting to read the instructions on the packet. Now that Polly no longer needs to be spurred into heroics, Fiona provides a more stable companion, as well as a voice of reason and wisdom. After all, that it is Fiona who confirms the existence of Tom when Polly doubts whether her second set of memories is real is no coincidence.

Significantly, Polly notes that Fiona says "the kind of thing[s] Granny sa[ys]" (206), signalling the parallel between her and Granny. In this triad, she represents sensibility,

wisdom and earthiness opposite Nina's silliness, wildness and fickleness, and simultaneously, she is equal to Granny, who stands for old age in her set with Polly (youth) and Ivy (adulthood). They are an embodiment of the girl, the woman (or mother) and the crone; the three stages of womanhood.

However, even though one could presume Nina to betoken youth, it is Ivy who mirrors her immaturity and selfishness. Even though Polly is her daughter, she acts as "less a daughter than a courtier whose role it is to soothe and flatter, fetch and carry, and who can fall easily out of favour" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 158) as if attempting to appease a particularly spoiled, volatile child. Aside from several other issues, Ivy is wildly irresponsible as a mother, going as far as kicking Polly out of the house for perceived slights, making her more akin a petulant child than an adult.

Consequently, Jones creates the expectation that youth and immaturity ought to go hand in hand through the parallel sets of threes and Fiona and Granny's connection, only to refute said expectation in the case of Nina and Ivy. By doing so, the novel draws attention to the fact that maturity and wisdom are neither qualities one inherently possesses nor ones which are automatically acquired as one ages; immaturity, with all of its additional traits, is not determined by age.

Moreover, Polly is —and needs be— neither. Her space in the triads is best explained through the lens of her heroism and *Fire and Hemlock*'s particular kind of magic. After all, it is Polly's ability to use the ironic magic bestowed upon Tom by Laurel that enables her heroic act. While the magic is not her own, Polly's ability to guide and shape the narrative she and Tom create is what allows her to rescue him. It is her ability to remain in the liminal space between silliness and sensibility —girlhood and womanhood— that facilitates this; the story's resolution relies on her ability to "blur the distinction between the rational and the

logical, so that the narrative [she] writes between them can fuse two worlds" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 157). These two worlds, "Here Now" and "Nowhere", are the everyday world and that of magic and it is Polly and Tom's imaginative game of pretend that creates a path between them.

Therefore, in order to be a heroic woman, Polly needs the childlike ability to confuse fact with fantasy, so to speak. She needs her potent imagination and the boldness of someone like Nina in order to act out her hero-play and face down people as frightful as Morton Leroy or Laurel. Just how essential this ability is, is accentuated in the story of Granny's past; although she possesses wisdom and sensibility, she failed to rescue her own husband, Polly's grandfather, from Laurel. To succeed where her grandmother failed, Polly needs the imaginative gift of children, but also the maturity and sensibility to figure out how to foil Laurel. She needs be not too old, nor too young; wise and selfless, yet bold and imaginative and most of all, to keep herself in a state of continuous learning and growing.

2.2 Three Measures of Possessiveness.

Arguably the most significant set of threes consists of Polly, Ivy and Laurel; three women who all share the same Achilles heel —namely, that of possessiveness. The similarities between Ivy and Laurel are profound, and signalled clearly by their names. Indeed, so is their possessiveness; the image of ivy wrapping tightly around anything it can find is potent and not accidental in the slightest.

Ivy is, by all means, Laurel's mundane counterpart, a "failed fairy queen" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 160) who does to her lovers what Laurel does to mortal men. *Fire and Hemlock*'s supernatural happenings occur against the backdrop of Polly's broken home; her parents separate amidst much fighting and her mother proceeds to throw herself into a series of equally unfruitful relationships. All the while, Ivy does as ivy is prone to do and clings on to both the concept of happiness and her romantic partners. When explaining what went awry with her marriage she expresses the desire for a relationship full of "happiness and sharing", seeming outraged that her husband does not share everything with her and declaring "he's got no right to keep himself to himself away from [her]" (90). What Ivy perceives as love is, in fact, total possession; domination so extreme that it blurs the boundaries between her and the other until they are another part of her. She is, as David calls her "a total vampire" (182).

Likewise, Laurel's entire modus operandi consists of her winding young men around her finger in order to take their life when the time comes. Moreover, even before claiming Tom's life to prolong Leroy's she feels a strong sense of entitlement over him, attempting to control every aspect of his life. Laurel too, wishes to possess these men to the point of absolute subordination and as the supernatural queen of fairies this desire is within her reach;

by using these men to extend her own immortality she quite literally makes them a part of her.

Perhaps surprisingly, Polly shares the same potential for hurtful possessiveness. As she grows older she becomes increasingly jealous of Tom's girlfriend, Mary, and increasingly frustrated over his lack of interest in her romantically. While as a child her relationship with Tom was devoid of jealousy, once she matures and falls in love with him Polly's love grows suffocating, "just as her mother Ivy's possessive love suffocates her marriage and other relationships, and just as Laurel's possessiveness will doom Tom" (Hixon, 2002: 88). This culminates when she uses magic to pry into Tom's life forcefully, full of excitement and glee. Afterwards, Polly realises how wrong this behaviour had been, appalled at the fact that "she had been just like Ivy —a miser who thought her hoard was being taken away" (349).

Referring to this trait as these women's' Achilles heel was in earnest; Polly's possessive spell allows Laurel to take away her memory and almost ruins everything. Similarly, Ivy's desperate attempts to clutch onto happiness leave her miserable and unfulfilled. "She holds her love tight like tadpoles in a jar, and the tighter she holds, the more slips away from her" (Mendelsohn, 2005: 159), just as her entitled demands for "a little happiness" (298) bring her nothing but unhappiness. However, there is one parental duty Ivy fulfils for Polly; children oftentimes learn from their parents what *not* to do and it is through Ivy that Polly learns to recognise the weakness in this kind of behaviour —both hers and Laurel's.

What Polly realises is that possessiveness is the manifestation of a desire to possess, regardless of who is possessed. "Underlying (Laurel and Ivy's) sense of possession is an indifference to individuality" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 159) that cripples any attempt at a healthy relationship but also provides Polly with a way to save Tom. If it was Tom, as an individual,

that Laurel wanted, there would be no way of stopping her. But since fundamentally any man who serves her will do, Polly can convince her to allow Tom to try and fight for himself. Laurel tolerates this because she can simply swap one man for another and it is finally, and ironically, her possessive nature that accounts for her loss.

Additionally, it is also through her realisation that her own behaviour mimicked Ivy that Polly realises that simply doing as Janet did in *Tam Lin* won't do. She has seen the devastating effects of holding on too tightly through her mother's relationships and understands that in order to win Tom's love, she needs to overcome her own possessive tendencies and let him go. Instead of presenting love as undying and blind loyalty, *Fire and Hemlock* argues for love as "a continuous process of an individual's negotiation with his/her own will to dominate his/her own partner" (Yamazaki, 2002: 115), and it is the ability to navigate those desires that allows for a relationship that isn't doomed to fail.

That Polly shares the potential for this horrendous kind of cruelty with Laurel and Ivy reinforces *Fire and Hemlock*'s rebuttal of a binary interpretation of femininity. Possessiveness becomes a harmful trait, which both our heroine and the wicked queen of fairies possess. Whether or not they are good or bad depends on the ways they choose to interact with this internal quality. In order for Polly to be a hero, she will need to overcome her innate possessiveness and learn to love truly and fully; to respect the boundaries between individuals and learn to lose, in order to win.

Chapter 3. Polly the 'Everywoman': Heroinism in the 20th Century.

Having looked at some of the major traits exhibited by the other females in the novel and what the way in which Polly navigates them tells us of femininity and heroism, it is now time to turn to our Hero herself. If none of the supernatural elements of *Fire and Hemlock* were real, Polly's story could be reduced to that of a young girl struggling to delineate how to be a hero through literary research, trial-and-error and observation of the world around her. Indeed, the trait that is most helpful to determine what makes her heroic is the fact that she approaches heroism quite consciously; after naming her imaginary persona 'Hero' (and arguing that it is very much a real name, and a girl's to boot), she "(begins) training seriously to be a hero" (101). This conscious effort to approach the heroic pertains much of the novel and it allows us clear insight into what it is Polly thinks makes a hero, and what it is that *actually* ends up making her one.

As mentioned in the first chapter, *Tam Lin* is as much the story of Janet's social conflict as a woman as it is the rescue of Tam Lin. Likewise, *Fire and Hemlock* is that of Polly's, but as the times have changed the conflict has as well. In this chapter, I aim to take a look at the societal conflict that Polly struggles with alongside her supernatural heroics, and how she differs from Janet as a protagonist accordingly.

3.1 Polly's Rejection of Femininity

As I have previously mentioned, *Tam Lin* is a story of intrinsically feminine heroism, where Janet wins her love through devotion in order to secure a father for her child. Likewise, rescuing Tom from Laurel does not require the physical strength or bold dragon-slaying associated with traditional masculine heroes such as knights —a lesson which Polly is slow to learn. Her behaviour and comments seem to indicate she associates heroism with masculinity, and struggles to accept her femininity in accordance.

Polly is said to be "an extremely pretty little girl" whose prettiest attribute is "her mass of long, fine, fair hair" (16). Her golden hair is not only a physical attribute shared with *Tam Lin*'s Janet but rather an important signifier to the use of symbolic language in the ballad tradition. As Lowry Charles Wimberley notes in *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads*, wearing gold in ones hair references the crown of gold that only maidens were allowed to wear and as such connotates virginity (1959: 318). As such, it is no coincidence that Janet's hair is blonde; "although blond hair represents perfection and beauty in fairy tales, in the ballad context it connotes virginity: yellow hair is akin to having gold in one's hair" (Hixon, 2004: 73). Due to its mixture of source materials, I believe *Fire and Hemlock* is referencing both and utilising Polly's fair hair to signal towards her suitability for participating in the paranormal events by equalling her to traditional heroines in fairy tales and ballads.

However, Polly starts off "(hating) her hair" (17), envying Nina her frizzy locks and unattractive looks. While she grows to appreciate it as she grows older, especially when Tom expresses appreciation for it, her initial response to the clearest signifier of her femininity as well as her status as the Janet of this story is rejection. Similarly, Polly rejects other things traditionally considered feminine; she prefers forts over dolls, is baffled by Nina's

'boy-crazy' phase and appalled at Tom's offering of his anorak, declaring herself to be "an assistant, not a damsel in distress" (121). Almost fatally, she is so distracted by how much she dislikes the girl in *East of the Sun and West of the Moon* so for "(crying) so much" and "(having) only herself to blame for her troubles" (179) that she fails to grasp its most important lesson. Even her gentleness, another traditionally feminine trait, seems to her a burden; she considers her unwillingness to hurt Nina's feelings "the first sign of an unheroic soft-heartedness in her which she later learned was part of her, and which no amount of reproaching herself seemed to get rid of" (105).

Moreover, when she decides to start training to be a hero, it is the traditionally masculine aspects of heroism that she focuses on. She joins the athletics club "to train (her) muscles" (101) and decides that what heroes need is strength, but also "courage and good skills and timing" (102), which she has "gathered from watching television" (102) as well as, undoubtedly, stories such as that of Saint George, who she mentions earlier on to Tom as an example of a hero extraordinaire. This admiration of action-geared courage is what leads to her bitter disappointment at her failure to respond to the rampaging horse in Chapter 4 with anything but fear, frustrated at herself over "the unheroic way she [...] screamed and crouched on the pavement" (89).

At this stage, Polly is acting in a strongly performative way; she is playing at being a hero based on her societal understanding of heroic behaviour through fiction. This performative heroism culminates in her attack on Mira, the school bully. The deliberate nature of this affair underlines the performative nature of Polly's; her defending another child is not based on their need. Rather, she decides she wants to perform heroics and then awaits an opportunity as "heroes do not fight for themselves, but for other people" (102), indicating another trait she believes heroes should possess, namely selflessness. However, when her

performance is successful and everyone "(regards) her as a heroine", Polly to her embarrassment realises that this performative approach to heroism isn't right as "(heroism) is inside you" and "this (was) public" (101).

After this incident, Polly decides to lessen her training afterwards and becomes more balanced; she stops doing things because she believes them to be appropriate training for heroism but continues to play football "because she like(s) it so much" (107). She panics at her realisation that her recent emphasis on behaviour traditionally coded as masculinity has caused her not to have appropriate clothes and has made a mess of her hair and grows more accepting of her femininity, seeing "why Mr Lynn had called (her hair) lovely" and becoming "rather careful about combing it" (112) while maintaining the 'masculine' traits that she naturally exhibits. By doing so, she also learns to recognise some of the traits that, while less typically associated with masculine heroism, she will actually need in order to save Tom from Laurel —the traits needed to circumvent faerie magic. While talking to Seb she 'tricks' him by being vague enough to prevent promising she will stay away from Tom all the while making Seb think she did. Polly realises the significance of this and considers it a heroic victory, declaring she "(has) won" (69) and thinking "she was probably quite heroic" (71). I will delve deeper into the importance of language and the crafting of a narrative in Polly's fight against Laurel in the second section of this chapter, but it is worth noting that trickery is a trait traditionally coded as female. Polly's recognition that this trait can be heroic is thus of significance and a marker for her turn towards growing more accepting of her own femininity.

Perhaps of greater interest is the reason behind this initial rejection of traditional femininity. Due to the conscious nature of Polly's efforts to become more heroic via behaviour usually codified as male, it is quite clear to see that her dislike for what she

perceives as feminine is reactive. In large part, this can be said to be in response to the kind of women she is presented with as examples of womanhood; while it takes Polly a couple of years to realise exactly why Ivy's behaviour is so destructive, it is clear that from very early on in her childhood she witnessed her mother's miserable way of being and admired her very little. Moreover, coming into contact with Laurel, who, as the supernatural and much more threatening alter to Ivy, confirms every anxiety regarding femininity Polly had, seems to be what catalyses her attempts to become more heroic by acting more 'masculine'; it is 'thinking of Laurel (that causes) Polly, for some reason, to say (...) (she's) going to pretend to be a boy"' (42). This indicates clearly her desire not to be associated with Laurel or, by extension, Ivy and the fact that in her mind this means she needs to distance herself from femininity as a whole.

Secondly, I argue it is a reaction to exactly the connotations her golden hair brings out; to the role Polly perceives women have traditionally inhabited in fairy and folk tales, as well as in ballads. This would explain why so much of her rejection is aimed towards fictional women and common literary tropes, as the damsel in distress, as well as fairy tales in general, which Tom scolds her for, because it is in these fairy tales that the answer to his problem lies. Indeed, Polly's hair represents two things: firstly her femininity as per the traditional symbolic language used by a ballad, and secondly her role as the Janet in this cyclical reiteration of *Tam Lin*. Both to the reader and the characters, it is her hair which signifies her part in the supernatural plot; Seb goes as far as to verbalise that it is the "(one) with the fair hair (he's) supposed to watch" (66). That both Polly's femininity and her symbolical ties to Janet are represented in her hair draws a connection between the two and as such, it can be argued that her rejection of her femininity is a misplacement of her rejection of the role she is to play.

Ultimately, what Tom does to Polly is morally questionable. In a cycle of manipulation and abuse, in order to free himself from Laurel he "must draw someone else into it. He must do to another what has been done to him" (Mendelsohn, 2005: 46). Polly is most opposed to traditionally 'female' codified behaviour when she is very young, perhaps in subconscious or textual rejection of the way in which Tom aims to use her before she has the means to do so verbally as she does near the end of the novel; after all, he did "(take her) over as a child to save (his) own skin" (386) and while it is not the only truth to a very complex relationship, it is *a* truth. "The truth between two people always cuts two ways" (385) and it is very likely that Polly's early distaste for femininity is in part a displaced distaste for the way in which she is to be used.

3.2 A Portrait of the Hero as a Young Woman

As mentioned previously, *Tam Lin* is "as much a story about a woman's social conflict as it is about supernatural events", of which "the conflict centres on a distinctly female problem, getting pregnant out of wedlock" (Hixon, 2004: 77). However, premarital sex and the societal conflicts that stem from them are, arguably, no longer the most pressing female problem for a 20th Century British audience, and certainly not for children. As such, in order to engage with a woman's social conflict in a similar manner as *Tam Lin*, *Fire and Hemlock* must address the problems that its heroine is more likely to face. It does so by focusing on Polly's development as an individual and a heroine instead of her sexuality; by shaping *Fire and Hemlock* into a Bildungsroman, Jones emphasises female development as the conflict to be addressed. Likewise, her growth is framed in the cadre of heroism; Polly actively strives to grow as a hero, and in doing so ends up growing up and developing as an individual.

Much of this development centres around the need to learn how to navigate social situations and structures. Throughout the novel, Polly deals with a broken home and a hostile divorce between her parents during which she is continuously marginalised and made everyone's last priority. As explored in Chapter 2, she walks on eggshells around a very unstable and harmful mother and is later on devastated to discover as a teenager that her father isn't much better. Furthermore, Polly is faced with the negative societal response this invokes; Nina prods Polly about how miserable her father's new girlfriend must make her feel and reveals that her mother's been gossiping judgmentally as well, telling her that "divorce marks you for life" (98). This cultural judgment is almost worse for Polly than her parents' actual divorce, making her wish her father hadn't come to see her just so she could have avoided Nina's questioning but it also serves to teach her how not to behave.

Similarly, she struggles with romantic interactions and how to set boundaries for herself and respect those of others. Polly's relationship with Seb is rife with persuasion and emotional manipulation, consisting mostly of Seb pushing Polly into things she doesn't necessarily want but isn't able to refuse due to her "annoying soft-heartedness" (257). Leslie shows her that perhaps it is kissing Seb that she isn't too fond of, rather than the practice itself, giving her "a soft, moist kiss which (she) preferred to Seb's grabbing and hard-breathing kind" (261) and granting her a less invasive experience in romance, or at the very least adolescent sexual exploration.

It is the paranormal plot running parallel to this Bildung and her understanding of heroism that teaches Polly how to navigate these conflicts. Just as Ivy serves to teach her how to deal with Laurel, it is interacting with her mother's faerie counterpart that gives Polly the understanding and strength to see her mother's behaviour for what it is and to confront her with it. Likewise, it is the emotional strength she gains dealing with the supernatural events that allow her to learn to cope with her less-than-ideal background and to simply ignore the opinions of people like Nina. Furthermore, it is her understanding of the ways in which everyone involved in the faerie plot has been continuously manipulating and manipulated that enables her to finally stand her ground with Seb and realise how wrong his behaviour towards her has been. Just as her personal growth aids her in navigating her heroism, her growth as a hero aids her in navigating her personal development.

Finally, a lot of Polly's conflicts are internal. As explored previously, much of her development consists of learning how to control jealousy and possessiveness, balance maturity and wisdom and childlike imagination, accept behaviour codified both male and female, and be brave and bold but also clever and insightful. Another key lesson Polly learns the hard way is not to be thwarted by embarrassment. This is, in fact, one of the most

important aspects of heroism; it is "terribly embarrassing" (129) and being a hero takes "a different kind of courage" (130), namely that to withstand said embarrassment. It takes Polly almost the whole novel to learn this, and it is only after Laurel takes advantage of her shame to erase her memory that she realises that "being a hero means ignoring how silly you feel" (349), which is a key element of growing up, also. Once more, her development from a girl into a young woman is closely intertwined with her development as a heroine. As such, Fire and Hemlock highlights Polly's development as an individual as the key conflict a woman might face, in contrast to Tam Lin's preoccupation with female sexuality.

However, in order to defeat Laurel, Polly needs do more than come of age, she must come of age as an author. Her Bildungsroman needs to be a Künstlerroman, as it is her ability to create narratives that allows her to work around faerie magic. Her ability to perform as a hero hinges almost entirely on her ability to re-write Laurel's narrative; Laurel's doubled-edged gift to Tom, that everything he says will be made true but also bring him harm, creates the opportunity for his rescue and it is Polly's ability to recognise the tale she is in, and to interact with it enough to interplay with the textual structure around her, that can finalise it. After all, as I have discussed previously it is through words that one can best, or be bested by, faeries; persuasive wordsmithing and tricksy bargains are their forte. In order to defeat them, it is needed to engage them on their own playing field.

Moreover, because Jones makes the tale of *Tam Lin*, as well as *Thomas the Rhymer* part of a recurring cyclical pattern wherein Laurel seduces and uses mortal men, these texts also serve as quite literal instruction manuals. There is truth in them, and by extension truth in other stories as well. Even though Polly has no magic or real power of her own, "it is the intelligent negotiation with magic, rather than magical power, that leads to agency" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 44); so long as Laurel creates a narrative framework within which Polly

and Tom can move, their understanding of that narrative can allow them to turn her power against her. Tom is keenly aware of this, as well as the linguistic nature of Laurel's magic and the strength of the 'gift' she gave him and as such spends most of *Fire and Hemlock* working to groom Polly in her abilities as a storyteller, as well as a critical reader.

He does so in several ways, including exposure to art and music. Perhaps most obviously, Tom frequently sends Polly packages of books for her to read. Far from being a random selection, it is clear to see that these bundles have been carefully curated; "Polly's reading almost always coincides with the moral or character or literary issue that has come up between them" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 185), underlining the deliberation behind Tom's choice in the material he sends her. The books he sends her for Christmas, after first commenting on the courage in withstanding embarrassment, all deal with the topic of courage. Likewise, the very first package contains books which discuss "the relation of the real world to the fantasy world" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 185). Through these, Tom tries to influence Polly's way of thinking as well as aid her in her development of critical analysis of the texts she reads. When Polly disregards fairy stories he urges her to read them, declaring that "only thin, weak thinkers despise fairy stories. Each one has a true, strange fact hidden in it" (171). This is, of course, a reference to the fact that some fairy stories, such as the ones about a mortal man in thrall of the faerie queen, are painfully true but it also teaches Polly to pay attention to the possible meaning behind a text; it teaches her to think critically about the texts she reads.

In addition, through their game of make-belief turned real as well as by swapping written parts of their stories, Tom also mentors Polly in the act of storytelling. Initially, while the ideas he sends her are fleshed out into fragments of story, Polly only sends him general ideas and concepts without ever developing them into a text. Over time, she uses the books she reads to develop her abilities as an author and inspire her own narrative. This initiates an

interesting conflict between healthy influence and downright mimicry; when Polly reads *The Lord of the Rings,* she promptly decides that the magical item Tan Coul is looking for must be a ring, which makes Tom chastise her and tell her to "use (her) own ideas" (261). Remembering this event when she starts composing her long narrative called *Tales of Nowhere*, Polly "[decides] to let her imagination take her where it would" (261), resulting in a sprawling, uncontrolled mass that Tom rejects utterly. It is through this story, written in almost rabid fervour with very little mind paid to thoughtful construction, "Polly learns that control of one's narrative is as important as one's free imagination" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 186).

In the same manner, Tom's dismissal of her purple prose as "sentimental drivel" (263) teaches Polly to view her own writing critically. When Polly takes another look at her narrative, critically this time, she realises what he meant and also pinpoints what she did wrong. It is the play she invites Tom to in order to show him that she understands that reveals her flaw to the reader; Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is, as Polly smugly points out, a prime example that the famous bard "(borrows) plots for his plays from all over the place" (262), although unlike Polly's early mimicry of Tolkien, he does so purposefully. Through these two contrasting experiences, Polly learns that while mindless copying won't do, a text in full isolation also will not. This becomes a very pointed commentary on the nature of *Fire and Hemlock* as a highly intertextual novel which utilises several other texts to reinforce its message, as discussed in Chapter 1.

All the while, Polly's development as a storyteller runs parallel to her development as an individual and a hero, growing more refined as she matures. First, Polly needs to learn how to read, and read critically, to recognise the tale developing around her and bolster her heroic traits through positive examples. But simply recognising the narrative Laurel has

constructed isn't enough; "only when Polly shapes the tales, rather than let them shape her, and only when she becomes an active reader and therefore writer of a new ballad (...) can she move within the tale that Laurel has written and take control" (Mendlesohn, 2005: 47). She learns this through mentoring from Tom, but also through her maturing and growing as a young woman; gaining agency as a reader and writer grant her agency as an individual, and vice versa.

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on *Fire and Hemlock* and its portrayal of femininity and heroism in the context of the ballad of *Tam Lin*. By doing so, it aimed to assert that *Fire and Hemlock* establishes a new image of feminine heroism for a contemporary audience through the reframing of the subversive heroism present in *Tam Lin.*

As discussed in the first chapter, fantasy literature, due to its playful nature and tendency to interplay, is frequently subversive. Moreover, *Tam Lin* is already a surprisingly subversive ballad; its treatment of Janet's feminine protagonism and sexually transgressive behaviour goes again what was, at the time, the social norm. It is not only a ballad in which a woman is a hero, but rather a ballad specifically about a woman's social conflict.

However, neither the traits that Janet needs to be a heroine nor the social conflicts she needs to overcome are those that a contemporary audience would face. As such, *Fire and Hemlock* proposes a new set of qualities needed, as well as new challenges. In doing so, Jones emphasises the need for personal development and individual growth instead of concerns over societal judgment of unaccepted sexual behaviour. By highlighting the different traits Polly must learn to navigate in a balanced manner in order to be a hero through the use of triads, the fact that personal growth is the main conflict Polly needs to overcome is brought to the forefront.

Furthermore, by delineating Polly's growth as a storyteller and placing the possibility of defeating Laurel in the realm of authorship, significance is also given to the growth of a feminine author*Fire and Hemlock* emphasises the importance of narrative and language in faerie magic in order to bring attention to the fact that this is fundamentally a künstlerroman. By doing this, Polly's heroic journey runs in direct parallel with her journey as an individual

and an artist. Building upon *Tam Lin*'s headstrong Janet, *Fire and Hemlock* presents a female protagonist who, through her conscious attempts at achieving heroism, is hero, artist and woman and in whom those three identities are intrinsically and unequivocally linked together.

While this dissertation has briefly touched upon the manner in which Tom has used Polly and the complicated gender relations this arouses, further research into the complicated relationship between men and woman as presented in *Fire and Hemlock* would be of interest. Throughout the text, men and women seem to almost exclusively interact in terms of one party using and manipulating the other, be it Laurel and Tom, Seb and Polly, or indeed, Tom and Polly. Furthermore, these do not seem to be exclusive to the supernatural elements of the text, as Reg shows himself to be just as subjugated to his new girlfriend as his father was to Laurel, albeit on a mundane level. As such, analysing the power dynamics between men and women would be enriching and certainly worthwhile.

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